

Novice Teachers' Decisions to Teach Agricultural Education in Urban Schools

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Abstract

The opportunity to expand Agricultural Education in urban districts is limited by a lack of agriculture teachers who are willing to accept positions in urban schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that influenced novice agriculture teachers' decisions to accept employment in metropolitan areas. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine novice teachers. The process of grounded theory was used to analyze the interview data and develop an initial theory to describe the teachers' decisions to teach agriculture in urban schools. From the data, several categories emerged including desired location, decision to teach in a particular school, teachers' perceptions of urban schools, and participants' perceptions of Agricultural Education in rural schools.

Introduction

The expansion of Agricultural Education programs in urban schools offers several benefits including access to a large student population, diversification of student enrollment, and an increase in the agricultural literacy of urban students. In addition, the creation and expansion of agriculture programs in urban schools can make a significant contribution to the long range goal of having 10,000 quality Agricultural Education programs by the year 2015 (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2006). Yet, the goal of increasing the number of urban agriculture programs is hindered by a lack of prospective teachers. Agricultural Education is consistently faced with a shortage of competent teachers (Camp, Broyles, & Skelton, 2002). Likewise, urban schools are facing unique challenges related to school staffing due "to rapidly growing student enrollments, accelerating rates of teacher retirement, class size reduction initiatives, and demanding working conditions" (Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000, p. 6). Administrators in urban schools have reported a decline in the size of the teacher applicant pools (Krei, 1998). The administrators find it challenging to recruit new teachers when school districts in surrounding suburban areas offer higher salaries, better facilities, a less challenging student body, and are perceived as less stressful working environments (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002).

While the influences on novice agriculture teachers' decisions to teach in urban schools have not been previously examined, research has been conducted on preservice teachers' decisions to teach in urban schools. After the completion of a field experience in a multicultural setting with students of varying ages and academic abilities, preservice teachers were asked to respond to the following question: "What aspects of your teaching experience would encourage you to consider teaching in an urban setting?" (Proctor, Rentz, & Jackson, 2001, p. 223). Responses to this question indicated preservice teachers possessed a desire to help

underprivileged students by supporting their academic learning and by establishing a concerned and caring relationship. They also appreciated urban students' responsiveness and enthusiasm and valued the multicultural differences among their students (Proctor, Rentz, & Jackson, 2001). Urban elementary teachers considered their decisions to take jobs in urban locations as a contribution to society through their assistance to students and devotion to providing quality learning opportunities to students of low socioeconomic backgrounds (Olsen & Anderson, 2004).

When Gilbert (1995) examined the beliefs that rural students had towards teaching in urban schools, 95 of the 193 participants expressed an interest in teaching in an urban school. Twenty-six of the students were motivated to teach in an urban area due to social or altruistic reasons. They indicated a belief that, "urban children deserved good teachers and good teaching." (p. 297). The respondents also identified several personal reasons that would help their decision to teach in an urban school including satisfaction with any teaching job, desire of a personal challenge, increased quality of life, and the potential opportunity for a higher income.

Several studies in Agricultural Education focus on the academic abilities, such as high school rank, ACT scores, and grade point average of preservice teachers who enter the teaching profession compared to preservice teachers who enter a different career (McCoy & Mortensen, 1983; Muller & Miller, 1993; Wardlow, 1986). In an effort to examine the impact of student teaching experience and other personal characteristics, Hovatter (2002) surveyed 75 preservice Agricultural Education teachers about their decision to pursue a teaching career. The most influential factors on the teachers' career decisions were a desire to interact with people and the opportunity to teach students valuable life skills through different components of the program.

The increase in urban agriculture programs offers a multitude of benefits, but without agriculture teachers who are willing to teach in urban schools, the efforts to expand urban Agricultural Education will be fruitless. To assist with such efforts, research is needed to examine the beliefs that preservice agriculture teachers hold about teaching in urban schools and characteristics of urban agriculture programs that are attractive to potential teachers. Currently, the Agricultural Education literature pool lacks research specific to these areas of critical importance.

Purpose

In order to establish and sustain agriculture programs in urban schools, a cadre of well-prepared Agricultural Education teachers who are eager to accept and retain teaching positions in urban locations is desperately needed. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the decisions of agriculture teachers to teach in urban schools. Specifically, the interview process was used to investigate the factors that influenced novice agriculture teachers' decisions to accept employment in urban districts. The following questions were used to provide direction to the research process:

1. Why did you decide to teach Agricultural Education?
2. What influenced your initial decision to teach Agricultural Education in an urban school?

Methodology

Constructivism was the theoretical perspective guiding this interpretivist research study. The use of constructivism focuses on the unique experiences of each individual and acknowledges the validity of each person's method of making sense of the world (Crotty, 2003). Through the use of in-depth interviews, the researcher and the participants were engaged in the construction of a narrative to detail the participants' decisions to teach in an urban school. Each of the participating teachers had the opportunity to share their distinct beliefs and individual experiences specific to their career decisions.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select potential interview participants for the study. This type of sampling advocates the selection of information-rich cases for study to provide thorough understanding and insight rather than empirical generalizations generated by quantitative studies (Patton, 2002). More specifically, a criterion sample (Patton, 2002) was used to select nine individuals who had graduated from a teacher education program and had been teaching in an urban school in (southern state) for one to six years. A brief description of the participants is included in Table 1. The pseudonyms used to identify the nine participants are included in the findings and discussion. A semistructured format was used to organize the one hour interviews conducted with each participant individually. During the interview, the researcher used a set of guiding questions centered around the factors that influenced each of the participants' initial decisions to teach Agricultural Education in an urban school. Additionally, probing questions were employed to expand and clarify statements made by the participants (Hatch, 2002).

Table 1

Description of Participants

Name	Teaching Experience (years)	High School Attended	Student Teaching Location	Ag Ed/FFA Involvement as Student
Ms. Brown	3	Suburban	Urban M.S.	Yes
Ms. Campbell	5	Suburban	Rural H.S.	No
Ms. Carter	6	Rural	Rural H.S.	No
Mr. Hill	5	Rural	Rural H.S.	Yes
Ms. Fritz	5	Rural	Rural H.S.	Yes
Ms. Taylor	1	Rural	Urban H.S.	Yes
Mr. Flood	2	Urban	Urban M.S.	Yes
Mr. Gall	2	Rural	Rural H.S.	Yes
Mr. Linder	1	Rural	Urban H.S.	Yes

The process of grounded theory allows for the development of theory using data that were systematically gathered and analyzed. This method allows for the establishment of a close connection between the data collection, analysis, and resulting theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and encourages the researcher to create a conceptual understanding of concrete realities that were expressed during interviews (Charmaz, 2003). The use of grounded theory offers the following benefits to a research study,

Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble "reality" than is theory derived

by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from the data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

The use of grounded theory requires a concurrent effort to collect and analyze data in the initial stages of the research process. A benefit to this effort is that it “keeps researchers close to their gathered data rather than to what they may have previously assumed or wished was the case” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 312). As part of a larger study, this research did result in a grounded theory and conceptual diagram that have been omitted in this manuscript due to space limitations. Key aspects of the grounded theory are discussed at length herein.

After the data were collected and transcribed, open coding was used to break the data down into smaller, more distinct segments that could be used to identify similarities and differences in the data from each individual interview and across all nine interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once the researcher completed open codes of all the interview data, axial coding was used to create a category that encompassed all of the codes that were appropriately related. Finally, selective coding was used to begin integrating the identified categories into an initial theory. Memos and diagrams were used to assist in the process of data analysis and help create a conceptual understanding of the developed theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

From the data, several categories emerged specific to the teachers’ decisions to teach Agricultural Education in an urban location. These categories included desired location, decision to teach in a particular school, teachers’ perceptions of urban schools, and participants’ perceptions of Agricultural Education in rural schools. The category of desired location was comprised of two axial codes, desired teaching location and desired living location.

Four of the participants expressed a desire to live in an urban area due to their prior experience in an urban area, their reluctance to live in a rural area, or for a change from their current living location. Ms. Brown expressed her preference for a city lifestyle, “I like living in the city, I don’t want to be living out in the middle of nowhere.” Ms. Fritz also wanted to avoid moving to a rural area, “I don’t want to be in a big farming area.” Mr. Hill thought that relocating to an urban area would be a “neat place” in closer proximity to the ocean and would offer a better climate, “I just got tired of the snow.” As well, Ms. Carter couldn’t specifically explain what led her to seek employment in a city, but noted “I just wanted to get away from where I grew up.” Even though Ms. Carter, who teaches in (city a), was eager to move away from her hometown, she would have been reluctant to move to certain cities in (state), “(city a) is a big city, but it’s not really a big city...(city b) would scare me.” One participant, who teaches in (city), explained that he would have never imagined himself living in an urban area, “I didn’t really want to be a part of it. Like when I think about really metropolitan urban areas, like downtown Miami and New York City, LA, I still can’t see myself living in those places.” He further explained that he did not want to live in close proximity to others, “When you grow up on a farm and your closest neighbor besides your grandma is a half a mile away, having somebody

to the right and left and above and below, that is kind of restrictive.” Contrary to his admitted concerns about urban life, this participant did decide to move to an urban center because of the opportunity to teach a specific curriculum offering.

The category decision to teach in a particular school was comprised of the following seven axial codes: the need for an agriculture teacher, influence of agriculture supervisor, influence of other teacher(s), curriculum offerings, professional network, social network, and personal control. Six of the participants responded to the publicized need for an agriculture teacher. At her first school, Ms. Campbell was compelled to take the job because the “program was being threatened to close.” The position at another school was “posted for two or three years” before Ms. Brown accepted the job. Ms. Taylor felt the other agriculture teachers “needed my help” after another agriculture teacher left the school early in the academic year. Although Mr. Hill attended college in a Midwestern state, he learned about the job opportunities in (state) through a job posting board,

I walked through the hallways at (land grant institution) and they had postings for the teaching jobs and there was a job in (city, state)...I said, you know that’s a good idea, maybe I’ll just teach in (city) or maybe I’ll just teach in (state).

Four of the participants discussed the influence of the local Agricultural Education supervisor in their respective school districts. Ms. Carter described the effective recruiting strategies used by the supervisor in her county, “I think (supervisor’s name) was one of the main reasons that I came to (city). She contacted me, she was very helpful, and she sold the program in the county.” Mr. Gall was recruited by the county supervisor during his student teaching experience and the supervisor “took me to a couple different schools”, one of the three schools that the participant visited is where he eventually accepted a teaching position. These participants would not have been aware of the teaching possibilities in urban counties without communication from the county supervisor.

Five of the participants taught in single teacher departments, while only three of the participants were teachers in a two-teacher agriculture department and one of the participants worked with four other agriculture teachers. Two of the participants were attracted to an urban school through the influence of the other teacher(s). When interviewing for the teaching position at her current school, Ms. Fritz had the chance to meet the other agriculture teacher who made the position “very attractive. He offered me class choices on whatever I wanted to teach. He said you can coach whichever FFA teams. I knew I would have a lot of choices and options for what I wanted to do here.” Ms. Taylor considered her colleagues, “awesome people to work with” and stated, “I chose to come here because I chose to work with the kind of people that work here.” This level of comfort with the other teacher(s) made the urban teaching positions appealing for the participants.

Three of the participants wanted to teach specific curricula that were not offered in all Agricultural Education programs. Due to his interest in plant biotechnology, Mr. Flood knew he would have limited job opportunities,

I knew that the track that I wanted to teach was plant biotechnology and I pretty much knew that if I wanted to teach that, I was going to have to go to a more urban setting because most of the rural schools were still very traditional in their program tracks.

Although he had been a student in a production-focused agriculture class in a rural area, Mr. Hill thought he would be well-suited for his teaching position because “it was very science based and not necessarily your traditional agriculture program.” Ms. Carter believed teaching the vet science curriculum would be the “perfect job” due to her love of animals. The ability for urban schools to offer very specialized curriculums assisted in the recruitment of these three participants.

An established professional network helped three participants transition into their teaching career in an urban school. Ms. Campbell credited the success of her first year to teachers she had become acquainted with during her teacher preparation program, “I was very fortunate that some teachers here are teachers I had classes with, so I already had some teacher base or some help. If it wasn’t for them...the first year would not have been successful.” She also appreciated the guidance she received from the other middle school agriculture teachers in the county when she was planning her curriculum. Mr. Flood returned to teach in the middle school that he attended because “my mentors were here.” He also felt the school would be an ideal place to teach because “I’d have a lot of support in this school versus going to a school where I didn’t know anybody and start from scratch.” The reassurance of having an established professional network helped ease the fears of these new teachers.

Mr. Flood also described the comfort of having an established social network in the city where he returned to work. Although he considered teaching jobs in another urban location, he felt “compelled to come back” to this particular city because “I’ve always had family down here and my whole life is down here.” Also, the idea of relocating to a new and unfamiliar area concerned Mr. Flood. He explained, “getting started and not really having much to start with, it would be very difficult for me to make a living in (city), not ever being from (city) or having anybody there who could help me out.”

Mr. Gall and Mr. Hill felt that the opportunity to be a single teacher in a new program allowed them a great deal of personal control. Mr. Gall liked that he would be responsible for the success or failure of the program without having any established expectations created by the former agriculture teacher,

I wanted basically to start my own program that I could say at the end if it was a success, then that was not because of what was already there. If it was a failure then it was my failure. I wasn’t being set up for failure by a previous teacher. I knew there weren’t really many opportunities for that, usually you have to deal with the teacher before that was great or the teacher before that was horrible.

Mr. Hill also believed that students benefited from the exclusive rapport they could establish and maintain with one agriculture teacher, “I feel like the kids, even though they are getting more opportunities at these big schools who have seven ag teachers, I feel like those kids are missing out a little bit too because they’re not developing those strong bonds necessarily with one teacher.” The expansion of Agricultural Education programs in urban areas allowed these two participants the opportunity to be the sole Agricultural Education teacher in a brand new program.

The category teachers' perceptions of urban schools consisted of axial codes including perceptions of school environment, perceived student interest in FFA, and expectations of student demographics. Four of the participants shared the perceptions of urban schools that they had prior to starting to teach in urban schools. The perceptions they previously held focused on the school environment and student demographics. When considering the school environment, Mr. Linder thought it "could be more challenging" to teach in an urban school and "more difficult than working with a bunch of country white folks like myself." Ms. Taylor predicted that her school "would have more problems inside" and "would be a whole lot rougher." She felt that teaching at her current school would adequately prepare her to teach at other schools in the future, "my philosophy is, if you can teach at a rough school, you can teach anywhere."

Two of the participants believed that urban programs would not have much FFA involvement and were surprised at the student interest in FFA. Ms. Fritz was impressed with all the activities in which FFA members participated, "...there was one point where I remember being surprised that there was as much FFA interest as there was. The other teacher would start telling me about the stuff that they did and I was like, Wow!" Likewise, Mr. Hill found that his students were eager to take part in FFA activities such as land judging,

One of the things that I thought was surprising was that kids were willing to jump on the FFA scenario...they were willing to participate in things like land judging where you are digging a hole and going outside and so I think it surprised me, their willingness to participate.

In relation to student demographics, Ms. Brown thought "being White was going to be hard for me because 85% of our school is Black. That kind of intimidated me, I guess. I thought there would be problems but I've never had a problem." Mr. Hill did not "expect the ethnic diversity, maybe naively I thought that there would be more white people." He expressed his initial shock at his first experience with feeling like the minority, "my first day of school, homeroom is first here at (school name) and I was the only White person in the room. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't expecting that." While the participants had some preconceived ideas about the school environment, student interest in FFA, and student demographics, their perceptions failed to discourage them from accepting employment in an urban school.

The category participants' perceptions of Agricultural Education in rural schools consisted of axial codes including perceptions of rural students and perceptions of rural schools. Four of the participants questioned their own ability to teach in a rural school because they felt rural students would be more knowledgeable than the teacher about agriculture due to the students' likely involvement in production agriculture. As Ms. Fritz explained,

If I had gone to a rural school, I would have had all those kids telling me what I needed to know. They would have all known more than me about producing a steer or if I'm trying to talk about landscaping in class, there's going to be somebody in there who's been doing that since they were young. They're going to know more than I do.

Although he was raised in a rural area, but not on a farm, Mr. Hill felt more comfortable teaching in a city school because he thought most of the students would possess little prior knowledge about agriculture. He was concerned that if he did teach in a rural school, "there was going to be some kids sitting there knowing more than I did." He further elaborated by stating,

One thing that I guess made me feel better about teaching in an urban school was just maybe the ignorance of the students when it comes to agriculture and that anything was educational to them versus if I'm in rural (state) teaching and I want to talk about a moldboard plow, well everyone in the room knows what it is.

Contrary to the beliefs of the aforementioned participants, when Mr. Flood had the opportunity to work with rural students, he found "many students in the rural programs surprisingly just didn't know anything about agriculture." Mr. Gall also felt that "even in rural areas there's ignorance about the breadth of agriculture. People just see what's out in the fields and they associate that with agriculture."

Ms. Carter elaborated on her perception of the role of FFA in the agriculture curriculum at a rural school compared to an urban school. She felt that "some rural programs were relying too much on FFA" and some rural teachers consider themselves to be "an FFA teacher" whereas she is "an ag teacher." Ms. Carter also mentioned how some of the emphasis on FFA is a result of parent expectations, "If I were sent to a rural school, I would be expected by the parents to be an FFA teacher. Well, where's this team, where's this team, where's this team..." In contrast, Mr. Linder thought it would be much easier to establish an active FFA program in a rural area because "the principal's probably been in FFA." The participants' perceptions of rural students and rural schools encouraged their decision to teach Agricultural Education in an urban area.

Discussion

The participants' desired teaching and living locations supported their decisions to seek teaching positions in urban areas. Previous studies have concluded that preservice teachers are likely to seek teaching positions in or very near their hometown and in a similar environment (Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1999; Gilbert, 1995; Werner, 1993; Zimpher, 1988). One of the participants from an urban area began teaching in his hometown. Additional research is needed to determine if more preservice teachers who were raised in urban areas desire to teach in their hometown or in a similar city. The present study focused on the desired living location and teaching location of preservice teachers who are primarily from rural or suburban backgrounds. If preservice teachers who were raised in metropolitan areas express a desire to return to urban locations, recruitment efforts should focus on urban students who could return to teach Agricultural Education in their hometowns or in similar environments.

The teachers who grew up in non-urban locations were also encouraged to seek jobs in urban areas. It is important to note that while one participant was willing to relocate to (city a) for a teaching position, she would have been unwilling to move to (city b) because, "it would scare me...it's just a big city." Consequently, when encouraging students to consider teaching positions, it could be beneficial to refer to a specific city rather than just using the generic and potentially negative term "urban area". By helping preservice students make personal connections with an area, they may feel more comfortable and be willing to consider a teaching position within the area. Although Mr. Gall had no desire to live in an urban area, he was attracted to an urban school by some of the characteristics of the agriculture program. Preservice teachers may be so concerned with the location of an urban school, they overlook some of the benefits associated with accepting a teaching position in an urban program. Taking preservice

teachers on field trips to urban programs could increase their familiarity and help them recognize some of the advantages of teaching in an urban school.

Only four of the participants completed their student teaching experience in an urban school. While two of the participants mentioned the role of this experience in their career choice, it was not the sole influence on their decision to teach in an urban school. Future research should concentrate more specifically on the contribution of the student teaching experience on a teacher's decision to teach in an urban school. Although prior research discussed the influence of urban field experiences, such as field trips, the individuals who had participated in field trips as preservice teachers did not elaborate on how such experiences shaped their beliefs about urban schools. It may have been difficult for the participants to recall their memories from field trips in which they participated as many as five years previously. The beliefs of preservice teachers should be examined prior to field trips to urban schools and again upon their return from such field trips.

Six of the teachers were very responsive to the need for an agriculture teacher. They revealed various motivations for accepting the position including the need for a job, the potential closure of the program, and the desire to help the current teachers. Without the publicized need for an agriculture teacher in these various schools, the participants would have been unaware of the job opportunities. It is important that the job openings in urban schools are well publicized through communication with potential teachers and teacher educators, job posting boards at the university, and job listings on the websites of professional organizations and the National FFA Organization. The use of these various methods can also help attract potential teachers from out of the state.

The county agriculture supervisors of these participants were helpful in the effort to place agriculture teachers in urban programs. The supervisors actively recruited preservice teachers and promoted the job opportunities within their respective counties. Additionally, the supervisor served as a primary contact for the participants and assisted them in arranging school visits. Because urban centers are more likely to have multiple openings, urban supervisors are more likely to be able to match teacher interests with available positions. Due to the administrative hierarchy of urban school districts, the role of the agriculture supervisor is of critical importance. Applying for a job in an urban school can be an intimidating process for a preservice teacher. The agriculture supervisor can provide personal assistance to a preservice teacher as he/she navigates the human resources department of a large urban district. Also, county supervisors are often more knowledgeable about the characteristics of the urban agriculture programs and better able than principals to respond to questions of preservice teachers. While this study identified successful recruiting strategies used by agriculture supervisors in urban districts, it would be beneficial to examine the characteristics of agriculture supervisors who are effective recruiters in rural and suburban school districts. The recruiting strategies used to draw agriculture teachers to rural and suburban schools may also be successful in attracting agriculture teachers to urban school districts.

Two of the participants were drawn to a specific teaching position by the other teacher(s) in the program. The second teacher in Ms. Fritz's school offered her the chance to select the classes she wanted to teach and the FFA activities that she would oversee. Ms. Taylor was

attracted to her position by the personal attributes of the other teacher at her school. Inservice teachers need to recognize their contribution in recruiting preservice teachers to fill available positions. If a preservice teacher is considering a job in a multi-teacher program, the other teacher(s) need to meet with that individual to discuss class assignments and teaching responsibilities. In addition, allowing the preservice teacher to observe at the school can provide them with an opportunity to learn more about their potential colleagues and the program.

A few of the participants were drawn to a particular urban school because of the opportunity to teach a specific curriculum, such as vet science or plant biotechnology. Two of the participants felt if they accepted a position in a rural school, they would be responsible for teaching a more general agriculture curriculum while they preferred to specialize in biotechnology. These participants considered rural teachers to be curriculum generalists, while they felt teaching in an urban school would allow them to be a curriculum specialist. During her time as a middle school agriculture teacher, Ms. Carter had taught a more general agriculture curriculum but was attracted to her current job by the opportunity to teach the veterinary science classes. By identifying the various curricula that are taught in urban areas, future teachers may be interested in teaching at a particular urban school for the opportunity to teach a specialized course of study.

Three of the participants felt more comfortable accepting a teaching position in an urban district where they had an established professional network consisting of agriculture teachers who would be willing to mentor the new teacher. Beginning a teaching career can be a frightening experience and some teachers feel very isolated from other teachers within their schools (Mundt, 1991). Having access to other teachers who can answer questions and offer support can be very reassuring to most teachers, especially novice teachers. Although Mr. Flood considered teaching positions in another urban district, he made the decision to return to the urban city where he had grown up. In his hometown, he already had an established social network made up of family and friends he would not have had in another urban location.

Previous research has documented the multitude of beliefs that preservice teachers have regarding the context of urban schools (Aaronsohn, Carter, & Howell, 1995; Gilbert, 1997; Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1996; Socoski & Hynes, 1991, Tiezzi & Cross, 1997). When asked to recall any beliefs about urban schools they had prior to beginning their teaching careers, the participants mentioned perceptions that they had of the potential challenges present in an urban school environment, decreased student interest in FFA, and the cultural diversity of students. Two of the participants thought the urban school environment would be a more challenging environment in which to teach when compared to schools in rural areas. Two participants believed there would be little student interest in FFA. In regards to student demographics, one participant was concerned about being a minority in a school with a predominantly African American student population while another participant anticipated a larger percentage of Caucasian students than was actually in the school. However, as a group, the participants discovered that their prior beliefs were inaccurate. Mr. Linder described his school environment as a “warm bath everyday.” Mr. Hill and Ms. Fritz found their urban students were eager to get involved in FFA activities. While Ms. Brown and Mr. Hill did interact with a large number of minority students on a daily basis, they did not encounter any problems specific to race. University Agricultural Education faculty could help future teachers formulate more accurate

ideas regarding the urban school context by inviting novice urban teachers to speak to preservice teachers about the beliefs they had prior to beginning their urban teaching career and the realities of their current teaching career.

Many of the participants had perceptions regarding Agricultural Education in rural schools. Several of the participants felt more comfortable teaching urban students because they thought rural students might know more than the teacher as a result of their rural upbringing and exposure to production agriculture. Ms. Fritz was concerned that rural students would be “telling me what I needed to know” and Ms. Brown shared her recent embarrassment when rural students “taught me how to tag a cow because I didn’t even know.” This belief was common among the participants who had not grown up on a farm. The perceptions the participants had regarding the knowledge of rural students was concerning, because it indicated the teachers were not confident in their ability to teach students from any background. Teacher education programs need to make efforts to assist preservice teachers in enhancing their level of efficacy so they will feel confident in the delivery of an engaging and relevant agriculture curriculum to any student audience. According to Darling-Hammond (2000), well-prepared teachers have a significant influence on student achievement. During teacher preparation courses, preservice teachers should discuss relevant curriculum topics and activities for various student audiences. Additionally, the preservice teachers could develop and deliver lessons appropriate for different audiences in a clinical setting. The completion of early field experiences in middle and high school classrooms in rural and urban settings could assist preservice teachers in developing the necessary confidence to teach agriculture to a diverse student audience.

One participant expressed her beliefs about the role of FFA in a rural Agricultural Education program. The differences between urban agriculture programs and rural agriculture programs as related to student knowledge, parental expectations, and FFA participation remain largely unexplored. Research should be conducted to identify the similarities and differences in urban and rural Agricultural Education programs.

University teacher educators can play an important role in the preparation of preservice teachers for urban schools. However, most agricultural teacher educators are Caucasian males who were raised in small towns (Swartzel, 1996), with limited experience in an urban environment. In order to become more knowledgeable about urban programs, immersion programs should be offered for teacher educators. Participating teacher educators could spend one to two weeks in different urban agriculture programs observing classrooms, interacting with students, and interviewing teachers. Such experiences could help teacher educators develop a better understanding of Agricultural Education in urban schools, which could influence their teacher preparation courses and selection of field experience and internship sites.

While this study provided worthwhile information about the career influences of nine agriculture teachers who were teaching in urban schools, all of the participants made the choice to accept employment in an urban district. It is also important to explore the career influences of teachers who would not seek employment in an urban school or who declined an offer for a teaching position in an urban area.

All of the participants in the study were graduates of teacher education programs at land grant institutions. Yet, with an ongoing shortage of qualified teachers to fill available teaching positions in Agricultural Education (Camp, Broyles, & Skelton, 2002), administrators often hire uncertified teachers to fill teaching vacancies (Roberts & Dyer, 2004). Similarly, the Urban Teacher Collaborative (2000) found that teaching vacancies in urban schools are often filled with teachers who are not fully certified. Consequently, it is important to conduct research on alternatively certified teachers' decisions to teach Agricultural Education in urban schools.

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